

BIRDING THE MARTIN H. BURNS WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

by Skip Charette and Douglas E. Chickering

The origins of the Martin H. Burns Wildlife Management Area in Newbury, Massachusetts, as a good place to find birds are somewhat obscure. What is not obscure, however, is that Martin Burns, as it is generally referred to, has become the hottest new birding spot in Essex County. This birding area is particularly interesting because it is a perfect complement to the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge (generally referred to by its major component, Plum Island), which is about seven miles away.

Martin Burns complements Plum Island because there are several birds found there, such as Indigo Bunting, Blue-winged and Golden-winged warblers, and Eastern Bluebird, that are rarely found on Plum Island or are seen only during the flush of migration. For a day's birding, Plum Island, Newburyport Harbor, and Martin Burns fill out a day card quite nicely. Martin Burns has become popular fast, probably because it has been one of the few places where Golden-winged Warbler, which has been present in each of the last four years, can be found. That is by no means the only attraction, as Martin Burns has proved to be a very reliable place to find nesting Indigo Buntings, Scarlet Tanagers, Eastern Bluebirds, Field Sparrows, and Blue-winged and Prairie warblers. All of these birds except for the notoriously inconsistent Golden-winged Warbler and many others can be expected to be seen on any late-spring or early summer day.

Martin Burns comprises about 1700 acres of mixed woodlands and reclaimed farmland. In order to go there from Plum Island, drive over the Plum Island bridge past the Plum Island Airport, and take the left at Rolfe's Lane (about one mile after the bridge). Follow Rolfe's Lane to the lights at the junction of Route 1A (about 0.4 mile), and keep going straight onto Hanover Street. Follow Hanover Street to the junction of Route 1 (about 0.6 mile). Cross Route 1 onto Middle Street, and follow it about 1.5 miles to a fork in the road. Take the right fork, which is Orchard Street, and follow it about 1.5 miles to the entrance to Martin Burns on the right.

Martin Burns is also very convenient to Route 95. From Route 95 northbound, get off at Exit 55 (Central Street), and at the exit take a right; if you came south on Interstate 95, turn left from the exit. Head east down Central Street for 0.7 mile, where Central Street dips and bears to the right. On the left it is joined by Orchard Street. Take this left. From here it is a little over a mile to the Martin Burns entrance on the left. When coming from Plum Island, go slowly and keep a sharp lookout because the entrance is somewhat hidden by the foliage along this narrow, curvy road.

**Most Common Birds in
Martin H. Burns Wildlife Management Area**

Highly likely to be seen or heard
during the right season

Turkey Vulture
Red-tailed Hawk
American Woodcock
Chimney Swift
Downy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Eastern Phoebe
Great Crested Flycatcher
Eastern Kingbird
Tree Swallow
Blue Jay
Black-capped Chickadee
Eastern Bluebird
American Robin
Gray Catbird
Northern Mockingbird
Cedar Waxwing
Red-eyed Vireo
Blue-winged Warbler
Northern Parula
Yellow Warbler
Chestnut-sided Warbler
Prairie Warbler
Black-and-white Warbler
American Redstart
Common Yellowthroat
Scarlet Tanager
Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Indigo Bunting
Rufous-sided Towhee
Field Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Red-winged Blackbird
Common Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
Northern Oriole
House Finch
American Goldfinch

Likely to be seen or heard in season if
the area is birded persistently

Double-crested Cormorant
Great Blue Heron
Wood Duck
Osprey
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Red-shouldered Hawk
Broad-winged Hawk
Rough-legged Hawk
American Kestrel
Peregrine Falcon
Ruffed Grouse
Black-billed Cuckoo
Great Horned Owl
Common Nighthawk
Whip-poor-will
Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Olive-sided Flycatcher
Eastern Wood-Pewee
Barn Swallow
Tufted Titmouse
White-breasted Nuthatch
Brown Creeper
Golden-crowned Kinglet
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Hermit Thrush
Wood Thrush
Brown Thrasher
Northern Shrike
Yellow-throated Vireo
Golden-winged Warbler
Tennessee Warbler
Magnolia Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler
Palm Warbler
Blackpoll Warbler
Ovenbird
Northern Cardinal
American Tree Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Rusty Blackbird
Purple Finch

Directly inside the entrance are two buildings, which are used by the area manager. The wildlife officials openly encourage birding. Follow the dirt entrance road through an open iron gate, and continue for about 0.2 mile to where the road forks. On the immediate right is one of the best places to park. A large clearing, which is often a very lively place, especially during migration, is at this fork. During early spring evenings the clearing is a site for the woodcock's spectacular flight display; the species also nests here. Later in the spring Whip-poor-wills call from this same area. It is also a likely spot for Indigo Bunting and Blue-winged Warbler.

The left fork is gated at this junction. The right fork also has permanently closed gates preventing vehicle access, but not before you come to two other, smaller parking spots farther down the right fork that can hold a few more cars. The gates require that the majority of the loop must be birded on foot. This also means your birding will not be interrupted by vehicles.

Martin Burns is so new as a regularly birded place that its various areas and features have not yet acquired names. The right fork of the road is generally referred to as the one that goes past the target ranges or the way to the Golden-winged Warbler. The left fork is generally known as the way to the bluebirds.

Although little used, Martin Burns is a multiuse place. Some people come to run their dogs or just to hike in a beautiful setting. There are also two target ranges that are used virtually every weekend. The first is about one hundred yards up the right fork, and the second is about fifty yards beyond that. No shooting is allowed on Sunday mornings. Oddly enough, the shooting does not seem to affect the birds. Field Sparrows nest around the range at who-knows-what cost to their hearing. One year a Golden-winged Warbler persisted in hanging around the shooting gallery. It is difficult to describe what it is like trying to pick out that delicate buzzy song between claps of high-powered rifle fire.

Both the road that leads (we hope) to the Golden-winged Warblers and the one that leads to the bluebirds eventually join a cinder track that was at one time a railroad bed and now is kept clear to service a small run of power lines. The two forks and the cinder track form a loop that can be birded in an hour or two, or four or five, depending on the activity, the interest, the heat, the insects, and the time available.

This loop, however, represents only a fraction of the birding possibilities in Martin Burns. The cinder track can be followed northeast to where it intersects Highfield Road at a place known locally as the Beagle Club, a distance of over two miles from Martin Burns. A variety of promising habitats, including high-canopy forest, brushy fields, and cattail swamps, are along this track.

Other trails lead off the main loop and cinder track within Martin Burns. On the bluebird side (left fork), several trails lead off from both sides of the road. To the left of this fork are trails opening to a series of brushy interconnected

fields bordered by high-canopy mature forests. When looking for bluebirds, investigating these short paths is often productive. The paths end at the edge of the interconnected fields, and we have never ventured deeply into these fields. They are filled with armpit-high heavy brush, laced with poison ivy, and favored by mosquitos and probably ticks. It will take a rare and intriguing call from an unseen bird on the far line of trees to lure either of us into that underbrush. Several bluebird boxes are along this road; hence it is a reliable place to find bluebirds. These boxes are well tended and are used by both bluebirds and Tree Swallows. One person observed that one of the boxes was used by both species. The Tree Swallows took up residence first and successfully fledged five chicks. When they took flight, the box was quickly claimed by a pair of bluebirds who then raised a brood of their own.

One of the more interesting paths is a former road that cuts across both forks, running roughly parallel to the cinder track (see map). Other paths lead off the cinder track into a rather impressive array of fields, forests, and swamps, few of which have been adequately explored. A good portion of Martin Burns remains to be explored—a birding terra incognita.

For those whose naturalist interests go beyond birds, Martin Burns is a good place to bring field guides to wildflowers and butterflies. The area has little shade, unless you simply go into the forest to sit down. (Sitting still, of course, is a good way to see birds that might otherwise be missed, especially during the nesting season.) On a muggy, cloudless midsummer day, the small amount of shade should be considered.

Martin Burns also is a favorite hunting spot, which is probably its primary function. This becomes obvious to anyone birding the area by the number of spent shotgun shells along the paths. For that reason it is advisable not to bird there during the months of October, November, and December, the hunting season, except on Sundays, when hunting is not allowed.

The accompanying table shows a list of birds seen by the authors within the last four years. They have been grouped roughly by the likelihood of seeing them. Keep in mind that because this is a dry area, some species, such as the waterbirds, will be flyovers. Of course, once Martin Burns is birded more, rarities are sure to show up. Already a Clay-colored Sparrow was seen by reliable birders and in the spring!

SKIP CHARETTE lives in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and has been birding Essex County for about eight years. Skip was the first person to "rediscover" Martin Burns, and there is probably no one who has birded Martin Burns as frequently.

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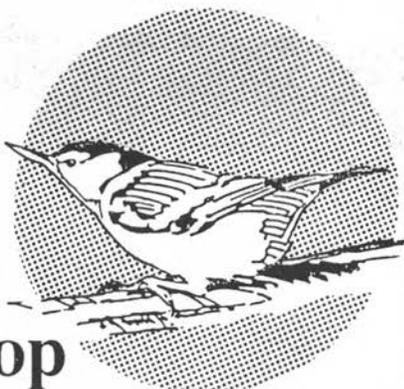
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